



June 25, 2014

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman  
The Honorable Charles E. Grassley, Ranking Member  
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Hearing, "The Voting Rights Amendment Act, S.1945: Updating the Voting Rights Act in Response to *Shelby County v. Holder*"

Dear Chairman Leahy and Ranking Member Grassley:

President Johnson called the vote "a powerful instrument"; Dr. King called it the "foundation stone"; and for the hundreds of progressive faith leaders across the country who today are members of the ecumenical African American Ministers in Action (AAMIA) it's a sacred right for addressing injustice, removing obstacles to democracy, and empowering the disempowered. When discriminatory laws threaten Americans' fundamental right to vote, we are called as moral agents to utilize every tool available. We know the importance of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) in successfully defending against voter suppression. It remains key to protecting families and communities, our own among them, from disenfranchisement. Hopefully, prayerfully, all members of Congress will realize this.

On behalf of AAMIA, as our nation marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Freedom Summer, the Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman killings, and the Civil Rights Act, and as we look toward next year's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the VRA, we thank you for holding today's hearing, and we urge Congress to restore strength to this landmark law.

In ruling last year on *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court undermined some of the most important protections of the right to vote in our democracy. When the Court effectively gutted Section 5, which as you know requires certain covered states and subjurisdictions to submit any changes in voting and election laws to the Department of Justice (DOJ) or a federal court for approval before they can go into effect., we heard voices from north to south, east to west, express absolute frustration, disappointment, and dismay. The Court claimed that you – our elected representatives – have not kept pace with the times, though the VRA was updated with strong bipartisan support in 2006, and as a result today no place is protected by VRA preclearance.

Congress was thus tasked by the Court with determining (again) the appropriate coverage areas, and you answered the call this January when a bipartisan, bicameral group of lawmakers introduced the Voting Rights Amendment Act (VRAA) (S. 1945). AAMIA welcomed that opportunity to revive the VRA and replace what it lost in the *Shelby* ruling. The proposed legislation directly addresses the Court's concerns by developing not only a new coverage formula but also by addressing other challenges with preclearance and injunctive relief. While

some of its provisions have prompted debate, including among AAMIA members, AAMIA believes that the VRAA is a worthy first step toward critically needed reform. Sadly, your hearing today is the first sign of any congressional action. With another national election looming, countless numbers of voters and members of our own congregations will be vulnerable if the process continues at its current pace. Time is running out, but we believe, as you have signaled with today's hearing, that the door isn't shut yet.

President Ronald Reagan once said, "...we cannot allow any American's vote to be denied, diluted or defiled." AAMIA agrees and strongly urges all members of Congress to support a full and fair legislative process for the VRAA. Starting debate and airing concerns now is the only hope we have of getting VRA reform to President Obama's desk and ensuring that whatever language he signs protects as many voters as possible from discrimination.

Since 1997, AAMIA has been advocating for social justice through civic engagement as faith leaders, spouses, parents, employees, taxpayers, and, of course, voters. The door is still open for the opportunity to right what *Shelby* wronged. We thank you for opening the Senate Judiciary Committee door, and we thank all who stand with us to protect Americans' right to vote.

Sincerely,



Reverend Timothy McDonald, III  
Chairman



Reverend Dr. Robert P. Shine  
Vice-Chair



Minister Leslie Watson Malachi  
Director

cc: Senate Judiciary Committee members